**Joseph Stalin (1879-1953)**

…..the man who turned the Soviet Union from a backward country into a world superpower at unimaginable human cost. Stalin was born into a dysfunctional family in a poor village in Georgia. Permanently scarred from a childhood bout with smallpox and having a mildly deformed arm, Stalin always felt unfairly treated by life, and thus developed a strong, romanticized desire for greatness and respect, combined with a shrewd streak of calculating cold-heartedness towards those who had maligned him. He always felt a sense of inferiority before educated intellectuals, and particularly distrusted them.



Sent by his mother to the seminary in Tiflis (now Tbilisi), the capital of Georgia, to study to become a priest, the young Stalin never completed his education, and was instead soon completely drawn into the city's active revolutionary circles. Never a fiery intellectual polemicist or orator like Lenin or Trotsky, Stalin specialized in the humdrum nuts and bolts of revolutionary activity, risking arrest every day by helping organize workers, distributing illegal literature, and robbing trains to support the cause, while Lenin and his bookish friends lived safely abroad and wrote clever articles about the plight of the Russian working class. Although Lenin found Stalin's boorishness offensive at times, he valued his loyalty, and appointed him after the Revolution to various low-priority leadership positions in the new Soviet government.

In 1922, Stalin was appointed to another such post, as General Secretary of the Communist Party's Central Committee. Stalin understood that "cadres are everything": if you control the personnel, you control the organization. He shrewdly used his new position to consolidate power in exactly this way--by controlling all appointments, setting agendas, and moving around Party staff in such a way that eventually everyone who counted for anything owed their position to him. By the time the Party's intellectual core realized what had happened, it was too late--Stalin had his (mostly mediocre) people in place, while Lenin, the only person with the moral authority to challenge him, was on his deathbed and incapable of speech after a series of strokes, and besides, Stalin even controlled who had access to the leader. The General Secretary of the Party became the de facto leader of the country right on up until Mikhail Gorbachev.

After Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin methodically went about destroying all the old leaders of the Party, taking advantage of their weakness for standing on arcane intellectual principle to simply divide and conquer them. At first, these people were removed from their posts and exiled abroad. Later, when he realized that their sharp tongues and pens were still capable of inveighing against him even from far away, Stalin switched tactics, culminating in a vast reign of terror and spectacular show trials in the 1930s during which the founding fathers of the Soviet Union were one by one unmasked as "enemies of the people" who had supposedly always been in the employ of Capitalist intelligence services and summarily shot. The particularly pesky Leon Trotsky, who continued to badger Stalin from Mexico City after his exile in 1929, had to be silenced once and for all with an ice pick in 1940. The purges, or "repressions" as they are known in Russia, extended far beyond the Party elite, reaching down into every local Party cell and nearly all of the intellectual professions, since anyone with a higher education was suspected of being a potential counterrevolutionary. This depleted the Soviet Union of its brainpower, and left Stalin as the sole intellectual force in the country--an expert on virtually every human endeavor.

Driven by his own sense of inferiority, which he projected onto his country as a whole, Stalin pursued an economic policy of mobilizing the entire country to achieve the goal of rapid industrialization, so that it could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Capitalist powers. To this end, he forcefully collectivized agriculture (one of the Bolsheviks' key policy stances in 1917 was to give the land to the peasants; collectivization took it back from them and effectively reduced them to the status of serfs again), instituted the Five-Year Plans to coordinate all investment and production in the country, and undertook a massive program of building heavy industry. Although the Soviet Union boasted that its economy was booming while the Capitalist world was experiencing the Great Depression, and its industrialization drive did succeed in rapidly creating an industrial infrastructure where there once had been none, the fact is that all this was done at exorbitant cost in human lives. Measures such as the violent expropriation of the harvest by the government, the forced resettlement and murder of the most successful peasants as counterrevolutionary elements, and the discovery of a source of cheap labor through the arrest of millions of innocent citizens led to countless millions of deaths from the worst man-made famine in human history and in the camps of the Gulag.

As war clouds were gathering on the horizon in 1939, Stalin felt that he had scored a coup by striking a non-aggression pact with Hitler, in which they agreed to divide up Poland and then leave each other alone. Stalin so strongly believed that he and Hitler had an understanding that he refused to listen to his military advisors' warnings in 1941 that the Wehrmacht was massing for an attack, and purged any one who dared utter such blasphemy. As a result, when the attack came, the Soviet army was completely unprepared and suffered horrible defeats, while Stalin spent the first several days after the attack holed up in his office in shock. Because the military had been purged of its best minds in the mid-1930s, it took some time, and many lives, before the Soviets were able to regroup and make a credible defense. By then, all of the Ukraine and Belarus were in German hands, Leningrad had been surrounded and besieged, and Nazi artillery was entrenched only a few miles from the Kremlin. After heroic efforts on the part of the whole country, the tide eventually turned at Stalingrad in 1943, and soon the victorious Red Army was liberating the countries of Eastern Europe--before the Americans had even begun to pose a serious challenge to Hitler from the west with the D-Day invasion.

During the Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam Conferences, Stalin proved a worthy negotiator with the likes of Roosevelt and Churchill, and managed to arrange for the countries of Eastern Europe, which had been liberated by the Red Army to remain in the Soviet sphere of influence, as well as securing three seats for his country in the newly formed UN. The Soviet Union was now a recognized world superpower, with its own permanent seat on the Security Council, and the respect that Stalin had craved all his life. Still, he was not finished. Returning soldiers and refugees were arrested and either shot or sent to the labor camps as traitors, entire nationalities that had been deported during the War, also as traitors, were not allowed to return to their homes, and in 1953, a plot to kill Stalin was ostensibly uncovered in the Kremlin itself. A new purge seemed imminent, and was cut short only by Stalin's death. He remained a hero to his people until Khrushchev's well-known "secret" speech to a Party Congress in 1956, in which Stalin's excesses, at least as far as power grabbing in the Party itself, were denounced.

Stalin is arguably, the greatest mass murder to ever live. According to the documentary; "Stalin, Portrait of a Monster in Blood," he is estimated to have been responsible for possibly 60 million deaths! If a dictator has people imprisoned or sent to camps, he's ultimately responsible for their fate, so in this context I don't accept the distinction between killing and letting people die of neglect. The gap between high and low estimates is enormous. At the upper end one gets estimates ranging from about 40-60 million or even 100 million, at the lower end about 10-20 million. Clearly, there's ideological 'monkey business' at work. Until someone can reconcile these amazing discrepancies satisfactorily and provide a very clear explanation of how the new figure is arrived at, it's impossible to say how many people Stalin had killed. Suffice it to say, he was one of the most ruthless despots of the modern era.